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March 2016 | Volume 58 | Number 3

Mindset 20/20

## Mindset 20/20

Laura Varlas

### Which approaches to growth and fixed mindsets have become blurry? And which offer clarity?

Since the publication of her book *Mindset* in 2006, Carol Dweck's research into the conditions that encourage motivation, persistence, and effort has become enormously popular in schools. The Stanford psychologist's findings show that when we have a fixed mindset, we believe our ability is carved in stone—if success doesn't come naturally, it will not come at all. With this mindset, we act in ways that will preserve our self-esteem and sense of mastery. When we cultivate a growth mindset, however, we believe that we can develop our basic qualities through effort. We are willing to risk mistakes because we know they are part of the learning process.

Buoyed by this research, educators now prompt students to change their brains through effort. Teachers focus their feedback on students' learning processes, not on their personal attributes ("I like how you referred to your notes when you got stuck" versus "You're really smart!").

It's clear that "the language of a growth mindset is there: we can all get better through effort and you can grow your brain," notes Santa Clara University professor Kathy Liu Sun, who has studied how mindset principles are applied in middle school mathematics classroom. However, she adds, saying these things is the first step. *How do you support it in your instruction?*

### Link Effort to Outcomes

To help educators answer that question, Dweck has highlighted mindset misconceptions that have taken hold, leading some to adopt "false growth mindsets" or to reduce growth mindset teaching practices to the aphorism "praise effort."

*Simply praising effort, regardless of outcome, is "like patting someone on the back as sort of a consolation for failing."*

Although many educators apply mindset concepts in deep and meaningful ways, Dweck became concerned when she noticed a troubling refrain. "Many educators I encountered would say, 'Praise effort, not outcomes,'" recalls Dweck. "Our work shows that you *can* praise the outcome, as long as you also talk about the process that led to that outcome."

Activating a growth mindset is not about the need to feel good in the moment of struggle or effort; it's about noticing effort that does and does not lead to learning. Simply praising effort, regardless of outcome, is "like patting someone on the back as sort of a consolation for failing," says Chris Hildrew, deputy headteacher at the Chew Valley School\* in Bristol, England. For the past few years, Hildrew's school has cultivated student ownership of learning.

"If our students fail a test, it's not helpful to say 'at least you tried hard,' because clearly it was the wrong kind of effort," he explains. Instead of mitigating the pain of failure, Hildrew's teachers help students dissect the failure by asking questions such as, "What strategy did you try? What didn't work? What can you do differently next time?"

One way to link effort to outcomes is to give students a pretest, Dweck notes. As students progress in their learning, refer back to the pretest over the course of a unit or the whole school year to track growth.

"Often, when kids feel confused about something, they feel like they're back to square one," says Dweck. "Their progress gets wiped out." If, however, teachers can show kids concrete evidence of their progress over time and remind them that they worked through the confusion before, they can help kids connect effort to learning and keep them motivated. Dweck calls this the *confusion-clarity cycle*. "Yc


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get confused when you face something new. Then it becomes clear, and then you are ready to face the next round of confusion and work through that."

At Capitol Hill Cluster School in Washington, D.C., Principal Dawn Clemens and her staff link effort to learning by pairing Dweck's minds research with John Hattie's recommendations on progress monitoring. Clemens says, developmentally, her middle schoolers need help training their brains to take a logical rather than an emotional stance on their achievement ("I need to study these things for the next test" as opposed to "The test was unfair" or "My teacher doesn't like me"). Throughout the school year, teachers work alongside students to extensively track where they are in their learning, where they are going, and the strategies they are going to use to achieve their goals.

## Distinguish Between Kinds of Effort

Blanket praise not only conceals that progress is the purpose of hard work, but also confounds students who don't know what part of their work is yielding results. "Many low-achieving students are working hard, [but] they're just not working effectively," Dweck confides. "Telling kids to just try hard is not helpful," she says. "It doesn't tell them all the strategies, resources, and input they'll need to get there."

One way Hildrew's school helps students identify effective learning strategies is by giving feedback, in lieu of grades, on assignments. "We give commentary, so students know what they've done well and what they need to improve. That kind of feedback has really helped students cultivate a growth mindset," says Hildrew.

"Effort is important, but it's in the service of progress and learning," reminds Dweck. "There are other equally important things—like finding successful strategies and seeking input." Recent research by Dweck and associates shows that teachers who promote a growth mindset have an explicit process for elevating strategic effort among their students. They work with students to identify where the student is, what the student doesn't understand, and what the student might try next. "They figure it out together," says Dweck, and then models a process of reflection and problem solving that students can begin to apply on their own.

## Identify False Growth Mindsets

In many ways, the mindset movement has become a victim of its own success. Having a growth mindset became the right and enlightened way to think, and some who embraced it became oblivious of their own fixed mindset tendencies.

In the classroom, these so-called "false growth mindsets" might play out in teachers who give lip service to students being able to grow their skills through judicious effort, but whose teaching practices betray a conviction that not all students have the capacity to improve.

For her doctoral dissertation, Sun studied how teachers communicate a mindset message to students through their instruction. Building on Jo Boaler's research on teaching math through a mindset lens, Sun found that teachers with self-reported growth mindsets often taught in ways more indicative of a fixed mindset.

For example, "teachers would talk about learning from mistakes, but then when a mistake would actually occur, they would almost frown on it, instead of valuing it as part of the process of learning," says Sun. Or teachers would talk about the importance of risk taking or struggle but later remove the element of struggle for their students during class, she adds. "Teachers might say, 'I don't want you to have to struggle with this, so let me just tell you how to do it.'"

Sun says focusing on right answers is not new to math instruction. "Historically, there's a particular way [of] teaching math that's very procedural and about answer getting," she explains. It takes time, practice, and exposure to new ways of teaching math using growth mindset principles to change this.

Jo Boaler's website, [youcubed.org](http://youcubed.org), is an excellent resource for teachers interested in making the shift. The site includes online courses for teachers, parents, and students; high-quality teaching examples; and guidelines for setting up growth-oriented group work and learning experiences where students engage in informative struggle.

Fundamentally, we are all a mix of fixed and growth mindsets, and we benefit from acknowledging the mix in ourselves and our students, Dweck assures. And as her work evolves, she says that she's becoming more interested in what triggers fixed thinking and how to work with those triggers.

## Lean In and Learn from Triggers

As a new kindergarten teacher in East Harlem, N.Y., and a former student of Carol Dweck, Leia Yongvanich was determined to instill a growth mindset in her students. To do that, she had to practice what she preached. "That meant, that first year, any frustration that I felt I couldn't back away from it—I had to lean into it and understand where it was coming from."

Becoming aware of your triggers means noticing not only what triggers fixed thinking about a particular task, but also what triggers fixed mindsets about certain students' capabilities, explains Dweck. If a student is struggling, do you think, *that student needs input*? Or do you think, *that student will probably never be good at this*? Just notice these thoughts without condemning yourself, says Dweck. Accept them and work with them.

Many times, Yongvanich notes, her fixed triggers came from a lack of knowledge about who and what she was teaching: kids' development levels, their cultural context, and the content. "Instead of feeling like these frustrations were my personal failure, I had to take that frustration and use it as motivation to educate myself."


Yongvanich worked on her triggers by filming herself in the classroom, poring over the footage (alone and with colleagues) to find areas to improve, and setting small goals to move herself and her students closer to success.

Susan Mackie, one of Dweck's Australian colleagues, has coached executives and educators to find their fixed mindset triggers. In one approach, Mackie trains people to give this part of their persona a name and call it out when they feel fixed thinking creep into their mindset. For example, "Here comes Dwayne telling me I can't do this or like it because I'm struggling with it." Fixed thinking is part of you, but it's not you, says Dweck. Naming it allows you to objectify it so that you can deal with it, she explains.

Teachers could use this strategy to help students name and notice fixed thinking triggers. If students feel comfortable telling their teacher their fixed persona's name, the teacher could use that to coach students toward growth. A teacher might say, "Let's see if we can convince Dwayne to try a new strategy and work through this challenge," Dweck illustrates. Or, "Let's see if we can get Dwayne to really listen to this feedback and plan what to do next."

## Always Growing

Engineering your mindset takes hard but smart work. It's not a silver bullet or a mantle that confers instant success, says Hildrew. "It takes a lot of reflection and self-talk, and trying to remove your biases when you get critical feedback."

"We tell our students, it's OK wherever you start, we just want you to set and work toward a target for growth," adds Clemens. "It's not about proficiency anymore. If we keep our focus on growth, we will get to proficiency." 

*\*Chris Hildrew is now head teacher at Churchill Academy & Sixth Form.*

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